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AUTHOR Tracy-Mumford, Fran; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Effective student retention strategies involve creating a vision and committing to that vision, ensuring that processes are applied systematically, providing support, and offering high quality instruction. Creating an effective program means having a real sense of what "program completion" is, how the state and programs define and measure retention, and how the program is organized and operated to achieve better retention rates. Effective student support strategies are as follows: display respect and build rapport; counsel students; establish trust between instructor and student; help students develop effective coping strategies; refer students to agencies/services for nonacademic needs; and build on family support. High quality instruction ensures that students succeed by providing them with opportunities for continual success, tangible evidence of progress, relevant instruction, support in class/tutoring sessions to develop program affiliation and rapport with instructors and students, and involvement in setting program goals. Structural areas influencing retention include recruitment, orientation, assessment and placement, student recognition and activities, student evaluation, student contact system, instructional delivery system, support system, and qualified personnel. (Contains 58 references and appendixes which include a table identifying state retention rates and a chart that shows state formulas/measures and definitions/descriptions.) (YLB)

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MONOGRAPH SERIES

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Student Retention: Creating Student Success

By
Fran Tracy-Mumford, Ph.D.

With contributions from:

Thomas Baker
Page Bristow, Ed.D.
Isabel Companiony
Judith Marshall
Daphne Mathews
William McLain
T. J. Mumford

National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, Inc.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface 1

Chapter 1 — Fostering Student Retention 3

Chapter 2 — Committing to Student Retention 6

Chapter 3 — Elements of Student Support 10

Chapter 4 — Quality Instruction and Student Retention 16

Chapter 5 — Structural Elements in a Student Retention System 22

Chapter 6 — Embarking Upon a Student Retention System: Putting it all Together 27

Bibliography 31

Appendix A — Retention Rates by State/Territory for Program Year 1991 37

Appendix B — How States Are Viewing Student Retention 38

PREFACE

> *Never before have we had so little time in which to do so much.*
> *Franklin D. Roosevelt*

Adult educators have identified student attrition (i.e., students leaving programs before achieving program completion) as a major problem facing the field, yet little research attention has been given to studying this concern over the last two decades. Attrition is a concern because it translates to both student and program failure. Studying student retention (i.e., students remaining in programs until they attain their goal) grew out of this concern. While student retention does not guarantee program completion for all students, student attrition guarantees non-completion for students. Ultimately, non-completion converts to loss of productivity, lower self esteem for students, less student impact and a reduction in student retention rates for programs. When student retention is addressed, programs and students prosper.

Two recurring themes in student retention literature are (1) the importance of supporting students and (2) the ability of programs to facilitate student success. Applying retention strategies makes a difference in retention rates. Just how many "dropouts" from adult programs can be prevented? The literature discussed in this monograph suggests that a significant portion can be prevented *even when the precipitating conditions extend beyond the learning environment to personal problems*. These same studies indicate that while we know patterns and signals, the human element puts its own spin on the specific students who are affected. But with effort, intervention and using the "proper tools" (strategies), conditions can be created to positively affect student retention rates.

Responding to the issues addressed in the National Literacy Act of 1991 (Public Law 102-73), this monograph provides a framework for establishing student retention goals and strategies. The framework clusters around three components:

- Effective support (to sustain motivation and foster persistence)

- Quality instruction (to attain skills leading to their goals and program completion)
- Suitable program structures/policies (to enable the support and instruction to be effective and assure systematic application of the practices).

Throughout the monograph, effective strategies and practices to decrease student attrition and the role of adult educators in the implementation of processes are interspersed with the findings in the literature. Positive results occur when programs emphasize dropout prevention, seek early intervention and apply effective strategies. States are encouraged to apply this information as a professional development tool to build program capacity and empower students.

CHAPTER 1

FOSTERING STUDENT RETENTION AN OVERVIEW

> *If we do what we have always done,*
> *we will continue to get what we have always gotten.*
>
> *Unknown*

English is a language where the meaning of a word can change by its context. Such is the case with the word "retention." In the public school K-12 system, "being retained" has a negative connotation symboling failure; but, in adult education, "being retained" has the opposite meaning. The adult education connotation is characterized by student success and learning! This monograph focuses on the positive meaning of "retention." It refers to adult students remaining in programs "long enough to meet their educational needs" (U.S. Department of Education, 1992).

If students entering programs funded under the Adult Education Act (AEA) are to accomplish their goals (i.e., their reasons for enrolling in the program), they must stay in programs long enough to achieve them. Traditionally, a high percentage of ABE/ESL students remain in programs for less than 100 hours of instruction; however, most students need 80 - 100 hours to increase skills sufficiently to achieve their goals. With students exiting programs prior to 100 hours, one can conclude that many ABE students, especially those entering at the beginning levels, are not achieving their end-of-program goals or accomplishing long-term outcomes.

ABE instructors, administrators and state-level staff feel a sense of frustration and helplessness when students leave programs before completion. This monograph addresses these issues.

Controlling Student Retention

Instructional programs greatly influence conditions for student success. Spady and Marshall (1991)believe that programs facilitate student completion when those programs understand and foster conditions for student success. After studying effective strategies, the researchers found that

programs focusing squarely on student success experience significantly greater outcomes and completions.

Learners, as consumers of service, directly or indirectly assess the cost-benefit ratio of their program participation every time they attend or do not attend classes/tutoring sessions. They judge whether the program is (1) meeting their expectations (realistic or unrealistic as their expectations may be); (2) helping them learn, or (3) helping them attain a better quality of life. When the costs of participation outweigh the benefits, education loses its priority in their lives. Programs control the benefits column as students tally the costs and benefits.

In addition, studies of student attrition/persistence, explored in this monograph, state that programs using effective student retention strategies achieve positive results. The effects of applying student retention strategies speak for themselves when students achieve their goals. Effective student retention strategies, described in this monograph, involve:

- creating a vision and committing to that vision,
- ensuring that processes are applied systematically,
- providing support, and
- offering quality instruction.

For strategies to work, action must be taken at all levels — state and local — and by all personnel. States must create policies and support mechanisms so that programs can apply student retention strategies at the local level. State and local accountability systems are needed to determine if desired results are being attained.

No Zero Attrition Rate

Clearly, unless adults stay in programs long enough to attain skills, they will not achieve many personal goals. The resulting loss of human potential reaches beyond program failure. On the other hand, there are times when program continuation is not possible. In the final analysis, students must be able to make conscious, well-informed decisions about their future, understand the impact of their choices and know that they can return to the program at a future time.

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution to improving student retention. Programs must be prepared to pursue a number of strategies. As staff become involved in student retention, there is a

realization that zero attrition rate is unrealistic and, in fact, undesirable — undesirable because informed decisions may lead to stopping out. A student retention plan helps students make informed decisions. Effective student retention plans make the difference between a positive learning experience, achieving desired outcomes and "another educational failure" for learners. An informed decision to withdraw does not carry a stigma of personal failure (Tinto, 1987) because "informed withdrawal" is accompanied with a plan for future action. This approach is positive for both students and programs.

CHAPTER 2

COMMITTING TO STUDENT RETENTION

> *We cannot direct the wind but we can adjust the sails.*
> *Unknown*

Having a student retention vision sends a powerful message to students. The message is the program's commitment to student success. The vision becomes a tool for initiating program improvement and assisting students in achieving their learning goals. It encompasses a promise to focus on student retention and provides a guide for student decision making.

The essence of a vision for student retention is a commitment by the state and programs to support students to attain program completion. Student commitment of time and enthusiasm for the program is the starting point for learners. The starting point for program personnel is a commitment to student success.

Creating an effective program that promotes student retention means having a real sense of (1) what "program completion" is, (2) how the state and programs define and measure student retention and (3) how the program is organized and operated to achieve better retention rates.

In the past, programs have been vague in defining when a student "completed" the program. There is lack of agreement among adult educators that a diploma/GED is the outcome of participation in AEA programs. What are outcomes for students who do not fit the GED/diploma "mold"? Intuitively, we know that "one size does not fit all." Yet, adult educators have not clearly defined "completion." One adult educator characterized adult education completion as the "most misunderstood and misused word in the English language." That tells us something about the message sent to students. Without a clear understanding about completion, programs cannot convey realistic expectations to the learners and learners cannot make a commitment. Furthermore, baseline information cannot be obtained and accountability for "completion" becomes an

impossible task. States must take a leadership role with local providers in defining/setting standards for program completion.

Program processes must be flexible to accommodate students with changing program completion goals. And change they do. To show the scope of change possible in students, look at college students. Up to 75 percent change their majors at least once before they graduate *including* those with declared majors upon entry (Gordon, 1987). AEA students should have as high a percentage changing their end-of-program goals. An understanding of the points where student goals change is important for program operation and for accountability.

Not only do student goals change, but their life situations change. Despite changes in the lives of students, programs can and do affect student retention even in the "worst" of all possible scenarios. Homeless students attain their goals and complete programs. Victims of rape and domestic violence complete programs. It is difficult for administrators and instructors to accept that they *can* and *do* impact students' decisions to remain in programs regardless of the obstacles. Commitment to students means honoring the dynamic situations of individuals and supporting them to overcome obstacles.

As a program example, Middle City (MC) wants all students to reach their full potential by setting high expectations for themselves and applying themselves to realize those expectations. MC staff view themselves as the "lightning rod" to assist students in reaching their goals. Students tend to show a change in their long-term goals after eight weeks. In class, instructors conduct monthly reviews of student achievement in light of student end-of-program goals. They find, as students feel more comfortable in the adult learning environment, their expectations increase for their own learning capability and their program outcomes. Instructors are able to transform this increased confidence into educational benefits in a tangible format in the student's learning plan. Learning plans are modified and the new educational goals are incorporated. The vision and commitment of this program is noted in three ways:

- The support system is in place to easily identify the student's new goals.
- The instructional system easily incorporates the student's new goals into the learning plan.
- The program structures are in place to review student goals and make modifications and revisions as goals change.

How each program views and implements support, instructional and structural systems contributes to how programs define student retention vision. It is the responsibility of the states/programs to create a set of criteria against which program progress can be measured.

The Goal of Student Retention

The goal of student retention is simple — *to keep students in programs until they reach their goal, program completion.* The role of programs is to *put processes in place to achieve quality instruction and support systems that enable student to attain the skills/competencies to reach their goals.* How does this work in a practical situation?

For example, Beth comes to class for a specific reason. She wants to be a paralegal. While she cannot become a paralegal in ABE, she can build her skills to the level where she can enroll in a program that would enable her to pursue her paralegal goal.

Student retention starts before Beth walks in the door. Processes must be in place to inform Beth that the program can enable her to gain the skills she needs to start her on the path to become a paralegal. Other program processes such as intake or orientation confirm her belief that this program cares about her and *will* help her attain skills leading to her goal, a paralegal. Each class she attends confirms or denies that basic assumption. Quality instruction, program support and program processes that enable quality instruction and support to take place keeps Beth coming back. The benefits of participation outweigh the non-benefits (i.e., hard work, study time, family sacrifice) associated with program completion.

From the program's perspective, the student retention vision is to "help all students complete their program goal." The program's vision obligates the program to enable Beth to (1) gain entrance in a paralegal program, (2) have the basic skills to be successful in the paralegal program and (3) get a GED/high school credential since the documentation of a high school credential will be a requirement for employment in this field.

A student retention commitment requires:

- a willingness of all staff and administrators to address the student retention needs of individual students.
- a clear statement of the value of student retention.

- acknowledgment that student retention is valued by the program.

Living the student retention commitment means:

- defining a set of criteria against which to measure progress toward student retention
- applying student retention strategies consistently to:

  (1) reduce the number of students leaving the program, (2) increase the number of hours students attend,

  (3) improve student achievement,

  (4) increase the number of students attaining educational goals,

  (5) ultimately, increase student completion rate.

Student retention is not the result of any one program factor or strategy. What affects one student may not be the factor or strategy that enables another student to continue. Effective programs strive for continuous improvement in all aspects of the program that contribute to student retention. Since there is no one solution to student retention, programs must pursue a number of strategies simultaneously and implement a system employing various strategies. This system must have flexibility because new situations are always encountered.

CHAPTER 3

ELEMENTS OF STUDENT SUPPORT

> *Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way.*
> *Booker T. Washington*

Research of effective literacy/basic skills programs points heavily to the need to address the affective as well as the cognitive domain (Phillips and Bellorado, 1985; Darling, 1983; Noel, et al., 1987). Taylor, et al. (1980) found that the "humanistic aspect was noticeably absent in students' recollections of their prior school experiences" (p. 74).

Effective support helps to build confidence in students, increase positive feelings about learning, improve self-image, create emotional well-being, help individuals through personal and educational transitions, and assist students in solving problems and coping with stress.

Schlossberg (1984) points out that when adults experience transitions in their lives, support is the key to helping individuals through these transitions. Support helps students (1) mobilize to action, (2) draw upon their psychological resources, (3) overcome self-doubt, (4) test out life changes, and (5) experience the impact of the changes on their lives.

Across the age span, group support from peers and church/civic organizations as well as co-workers plays a large role in determining levels of self-worth (Harter, 1990).

Effective Support

Effective support is directly related to student retention and student success. Effective support strategies will be highlighted in this section by discussing strategies that the literature states programs should be utilizing. Each strategy will be followed by a short discussion of that strategy. Support strategies include:

- Display respect and build rapport (Balmuth, 1987; Wlodkowski, 1988)

Rapport with the instructor and other students enhances self esteem, satisfaction with the program and commitment to continue the program. Helping students establish linkages with the program, staff and students appears to be an effective means of reducing attrition (Jones, 1986; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1977).

• Counsel students with educational and career planning services (Phillips and Bellorado, 1965; Greenleigh, 1968; Wlodkowski, 1988; Champagne and Young, 1980; Prosen, 1983)

Show how the program can assist students in reaching their personal and career goals (Smith-Burke, 1987; Phillips and Bellorado, 1985). Counseling helps individuals through educational transitions (Schlossberg, 1984) and builds confidence in students. A three year Minnesota study concluded that more than 50 percent of those students who did not have some supportive contact with an advisor, counselor or instructor during the first three weeks of enrollment did not complete the program (Noel, et al., 1987).

• Set realistic expectations and goals (Darkenwald and Gavin, 1987; Mavis, 1987)

Student goals set the purpose for enrollment and participation. Commitment comes from knowing that goals are being met. Realistic expectations enable students to know how they will move toward their goal(s). Tinto (1987) found that many students enter programs with only the vaguest notion of what they want to do. Lack of information about instructional needs, requirements of participation, and the scope of work are only a few of the things that students do not know upon entry. Support is needed to help students clarify their understanding of the demands that will be placed on them (Gordon, 1987).

The Portage Township Schools in Indiana (1981) found that 76 percent of the dropouts from the ABE/GED program had unrealistic expectations of their potential educational attainment within the timeframe of the program. The report recommended assisting students in setting realistic expectations during intake. Students need help as they enter programs to identify the outcomes and competencies they can expect to develop over specific time periods. When we become more specific about outcomes, outcomes can then be converted into more clear and realistic benefit statements that connect directly with individual student's motivation and end-of-program goals (Noel, et al., 1987).

• Build commitment from students to achieve their goals (Tinto, 1975)

Helping students clarify their purpose for enrolling in the program and the anticipated outcomes from participation increases motivation to persist. The way students "feel" about the experience and how they are helped to set their goals builds commitment to program completion.

• Sustain attendance in programs (Darling, 1983; Beder and Cerrara, 1988; Newman, 1980)

Attendance pattern is a strong predictor of withdrawal. Sporadic attendance decreases learning and leads to non-persistence. Increased program satisfaction translates to higher student attendance and program continuation (Beder and Cerrara, 1988). If a learner perceives that sessions are meaningful and productive, outside activities that pose an attendance conflict for the student will not take precedence (Newman, 1980) and students will find ways to overcome obstacles.

• Establish trust between instructor and student (Phillips and Bellorado, 1985; Thompson, 1988)

Rapport between the instructor and the student builds connection with the program. A sense of connection between the student and the program increases retention rates (University of Maryland, 1991). The trust level indicates that instructors care about each student. Students indicate they continue in programs because the teacher cares about them and their success (Thompson, 1988). Students who maintain isolation within the program are most likely to drop (Wilson, 1980; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1977).

• Overcome self-doubt (Noel, et al., 1987) and build student confidence (Taylor, et al. 1980)

Previous non-success in school or being out-of-school for an extended period of time translates into self-doubt for returning students. Self-doubt is usually connected with the fear of disappointing oneself or others (i.e., family or friends) (Anderson, 1987). Students need support from counselors and instructors to deal with this self-defeating attitude and sources of anxiety. Emotional encouragement helps adults overcome previous school failure and confusion (Jones, 1981; Champagne and Young, 1980).

• Help students overcome embarrassment at returning to school (Smith-Burke, 1987)

Students express embarrassment in returning to a basic education setting. To admit "previous failure" on their part is difficult. Smith-Burke (1987) found that the number of men who spoke about embarrassment exceeded the number of women three to one. Cultural factors might account for this trend. Because of this embarrassment, the most critical decision a student makes is whether or not to show up for the first class. Bock (1980) states that "this is the stage where many under-educated participants dropout. . . . It calls for assurance that the first class session will be a positive experience." When six to nine percent of enrollees in Delaware programs do not attend one class after enrolling, it is clear that "stepping in the door" is a major decision (Delaware Department of Public Instruction, 1989).

• Develop problem solving skills (Rabianski-Carriuolo, 1982; Mavis, 1987)

Rabianski-Carriuolo (1982) found that retention of students occurred and learning increased when a systematic intervention support program was provided to adult academic skill deficient students. Intervention in this study was given in the form of problem solving skill development. These problem solving skills benefit students beyond the immediate program. Problem solving is a skill are used in employment and enhance student retention (Mavis, 1987).

• Assist students to develop effective coping strategies (Howard, 1987; Schlossberg, 1984; Lewis, 1984)

Coping with adversity to achieve a higher goal is part of achieving in life and feeling good about oneself. Coping leads to persistence (Hodges, 1982). The self-discipline needed to be persistent can be facilitated (Ziglar, 1993).

• Refer students to agencies/services to respond to non-academic needs (Mavis, 1987)

Education cannot function in a vacuum. Programs need to access supportive services such as transportation, child care, employability skills, job placement, and health care through collaborative efforts with other agencies or groups. These services may be the services needed to enable students to remain active in programs.

• Build on family support (Hayes, 1988; Lewis, 1984; Anderson, 1987)

Student support and encouragement from significant people in the lives of students directly affects attendance (Smith-Burke, 1987; Mulligan, 1989). Hayes, 1988 found that families can be the strongest support system or the strongest non-support system for students. In Lewis' study (1984) of ABE/GED students in Connecticut, married students tended to have the most positive support. Anderson (1987) noted that families who value education and stress its importance influence student's persistence.

Initiating a Student Support System

All the previously noted factors play a significant role in providing "clues" to programs which help students persist. Creating a climate of mutual respect where student contributions are valued and the student is encouraged to take learning risks shows students they are the reason the program exists. Actions by program personnel — from administrator to instructor to support staff — encourage sustained effort and participation from students. To acknowledge this impact is to accept responsibility for student retention. To ignore this impact means that students leave programs due to benign neglect.

Assisting students to use effective coping strategies and realize there are alternative choices to dropping out of programs leads to program continuation (Howard, 1987). Too often students leave programs thinking that leaving will solve their problem(s). The result is usually a long-term problem perpetuated. A strong student support system would facilitate problem solving and decision making to overcome obstacles or barriers to participation (Mavis, 1987).

Jim is an example of a short-term response perpetuating a long-term problem. After starting ABE classes, Jim got a job which was part of his motivation for enrolling in the program. (He also wanted a high school diploma or GED.) Soon after starting his job, Jim experienced a conflict with his work schedule and the class meeting time. Instead of talking to the employer ("new employees do not ask for favors") or program personnel to learn about alternatives, Jim stopped attending class. He did not learn about options such as other times to attend class or about home study. Unfortunately for Jim, he has no high school diploma/GED. This lack of a credential will hold him back from a promotion. With a diploma/GED he would qualify for a promotion in six months. Unless the program contacts him (which an effective "contact system" would assure), he is a loss from the program until he finds himself in a crisis situation in six months when he learns he is being passed over for promotion due to ineligibility. At that point, there still is no guarantee that he will return because he may be too embarrassed to return to the program.

Students need to know that program personnel care about them and that a support network is available to them. A support network includes counselor support, classroom support and support services to students (particularly child care and transportation). Transition services for students to other education or community services are components of a support network. If services cannot be given on-site, then a referral to agencies/services is needed.

CHAPTER 4

QUALITY INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT RETENTION

> *Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.*
> *John Wooden*

Recognition that any successful adult education program must offer quality instruction for students to complete a program seems rather obvious because "the more students learn, . . . the more likely they are to persist. When we get student success, satisfaction, and learning together, persistence is the outcome" (Noel, et al., 1987, p. 1). Knowing and using effective strategies impact — directly and indirectly — on program satisfaction, student persistence, motivation and retention.

Quality Instruction

Quality instruction is the foundation of effective student retention. Student retention literature addresses instructional areas by saying that programs should:

• Create a successful first class (Bock, 1980; Noel, et al., 1987)

Understanding the sections in Chapter 3 on embarrassment in returning and self-doubt associated with returning to a learning environment explain why the first class must be a positive experience. Smith-Burke (1987) points out that the first class is the students' first "solo" activity, difficult to face by most and impossible to face by others. A key step in improving retention is the recognition that the first class session is the most important that learners will encounter. Every student must be "reached" during this class. Students need to identify specific ways that their learning in the program will benefit and have value to them (Noel, et al., 1987).

• Establish Realistic Expectations (Portage Township, 1981; Lerche, 1985; Beal and Noel, 1980)

Part of establishing realistic expectations is the responsibility of the instructor. Students need to have a realistic time frame for accomplishing tasks. This means understanding the scope of tasks, study load, and other participation factors. Even students who "only" want to learn to read their Bible should be expected to apply learning in situations other than reading the Bible to build their skills.

Compatibility between student interest, ability, expectations and the program's expectations, requirements and demands leads to student satisfaction and program completion. All points of contact during the entry process should be a "well articulated statement of what the program offers and does" (Beal and Noel, 1980). Program information should be given to students during recruitment and orientation so that when students enter the instructional setting, there is a clear picture of expectations.

• Practice mutual instructor/student planning to foster student goal attainment (Forrest, 1987; Tinto, 1975)

Establishing learner goals should be an integral part of the intake process. The program's goal setting process can foster student retention to align student end-of-program goals and learning objectives. Student learning objectives must relate to the student's purpose for enrolling in the program. Active involvement in establishing the learning objectives will increase student commitment to the program. As more students commit themselves to the goal of completing the program, they are more likely to persist when obstacles occur (Tinto, 1975).

Instructors can motivate students to commit themselves to their goals by helping students understand the ways in which program completion will be both desirable and rewarding (Hodges, 1982). Goals define when the program has met its obligation to the student. Probing, planning and re-planning enables instructors to target when an initial end-of-program goal changes. This enables the student learning plan to be amended, thus sustaining student motivation and increasing the likelihood for student completion. Regularly reviewing student progress toward their goals is critical to helping students stay focused and makes the learning relevant.

When student end-of-program goals become the basis of program planning, student completion becomes attainable. Without goals, there is no common target for program personnel and students. When students are successful, programs are successful. This process is circular; the *student goal* is the starting and ending point.

• Ensure continuous success (Balmuth, 1987; Wallace, 1965; Knowles, 1980)

Adults move toward success; those who experience success and satisfaction are more likely to continue in programs to completion. Wallace states "adult students cannot fail today and succeed tomorrow; for if they fail today, they will not be back tomorrow" (p. 85). Instructors should demonstrate to their students that they care about them personally and that they have a genuine concern for their progress (Jones, 1986). If negative attitudes form, they become barriers to learning and impair motivation to learn (Wlodkowski, 1988).

• Provide tangible evidence of success (Lerche, 1985; Darkenwald, 1986)

Instructor expression of confidence in students reaffirms feelings of competence, and builds confidence, self-determination and motivation. Lerche (1985) recommends a diagnostic approach which enables students to recognize what they already know and what they need to learn. Students need to be given feedback regularly regarding their progress to show them that they are successful. Visual representation in the form of checklists or graphs provide tangible evidence of progress. Adults appreciate and need recognition to sustain motivation.

• Provide clear explanations of content (Taylor, et al, 1980; Jones and Petry 1980)

Students in the Portage Township study (1981) identified the instructor's ability to "give clear, simple explanations" (p. 32) as one of the most important aspects of good instruction. Jones and Petry (1980) found the "most commonly observed instructor action was the verbal explanation of a concept" (p. 76). Taylor, et al. (1980) found that students in a GED/high school completion program who had instructors willing to explain material thoroughly were more satisfied with their educational programs. Students state that "good instructors" have the patience to explain things until students understand without making them "feel stupid." Instructor "helpfulness" is one of the best predictors of how students perceive effective instruction (Darkenwald, 1986).

• Provide effective feedback regarding student learning (Anderson and Darkenwald, 1979)

A process to obtain student input and feedback relative to meeting their needs is important to student satisfaction. Adults are ready to learn when there is a need to know something, usually to

perform more effectively in some aspect of life (Knowles, 1980). The more quickly students receive feedback, the more efficient the learning.

• Create an adult learner-centered instructional program (Phillips and Bellorado, 1985)

Student satisfaction is highest when interactions between staff and student are learner-centered as opposed to program-centered. Instructors who apply adult learning principles have higher student attendance rates than instructors who do not utilize these principles. Beder and Cerrara's (1988) study of andragogical instruction methods of ABE/GED instruction found that instructors who establish a comfortable trusting environment, use instruction/learning teams, mutual instructor/student planning, and apply self-directed learning had a significant impact on student attendance.

• Offer relevant instruction (Anderson and Darkenwald 1979; Jones, 1981)

The more meaningful the instruction, the more satisfaction adults have with their program. Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) found the most powerful predictor of continued participation in adult programs was satisfaction with the learning activity in terms of meeting their purpose for attending the program. Continued participation and student satisfaction with the program is directly affected by the instructional content.

• Apply learnings quickly (Fingeret, 1983; Jones, 1981)

The sooner learning can be applied, the more satisfied students are with their progress. Increased student commitment to learning is related to understanding the benefits of learning (Hodges, 1982). If a learner perceives that sessions are meaningful and productive, students will sustain attendance (Newman, 1980).

• Establish trust and cooperation (Phillips and Bellorado, 1985; Thompson, 1988)

Methods and strategies that emphasize cooperation and maximize learner involvement build trust, accelerate learning and fosters self-direction. This ties into effective support discussed in Chapter 3 and builds affiliation to the program and among students.

• Plan strategies for "plateaus of progress" (i.e., times when student progress is slow) (Gold, 1984)

While visible measures of success are essential, instructors must be aware of "plateaus of progress" when student progress will be slow. It is during these times that students are at high risk for withdrawal. Instructors must focus on the importance of the small steps students are making and the intensive effort needed to succeed. These times lead to major sources of pride when the hurdles are overcome. The plateaus are usually followed by a period of quick growth.

• Follow "good instructor" practices (Phillips and Bellorado, 1985)

Researchers found that "good" instructors (as identified by students and instructors of adults) are sensitive to and care for students, are willing to offer encouragement, have high student expectations, have personal concern for students, have patience with and respect for students and convey a positive attitude about the students' chance for success. When others believe in them, they will start believing in themselves.

• Obtain student feedback and evaluate progress relative to student goals (Lerche, 1985; Beal and Noel, 1980)

Adults move toward their purpose and will seek ways to attain that purpose. Goals give students motivation and direction. Their goals become the sustaining purpose for attendance. That is why giving students feedback is important to programs; programs can determine if they are moving in the right direction for all students. Student perceptions of their program provide input about operation. Programs should know how satisfied students are with their learning. Student feedback also makes students feel important and empowered. Adults who are satisfied with their program continue even when obstacles occur.

Applying Student Retention Strategies in Instruction

In summary, quality instruction enables students to acquire skills and competencies allowing them to make desired changes in their lives. For students to achieve, they need (1) opportunities for continual success, starting in the first class and in each session thereafter, (2) clear explanations from instructors, (3) tangible evidence of progress, (4) relevant instruction, (5) support in

class/tutoring sessions to develop program affiliation and rapport with instructors and classmates, and (6) involvement in setting program goals.

Finally, students want their instructors to have patience with them as they learn no matter how long it takes to grasp a new concept or skill. They want their instructor to explain things as many times as needed for comprehension. The result is increased student success and, as a result, increased retention.

CHAPTER 5

STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS IN A STUDENT RETENTION SYSTEM

> *The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today.*
> *Franklin Roosevelt*

Structures and Procedures will ensure that all students receive high quality education and services. Consistency across the system guarantees all students a high level of excellence from programs. Consistency, tempered with flexibility, requires devoting energy and human/fiscal resources to achieve student retention. Programs must be open to implementing processes that foster student retention. Examination of program processes and procedures leads to identification of areas of strength and areas needing program improvement. Structural areas influencing retention include the following:

- Recruitment
- Orientation
- Assessment and Placement
- Student Recognition and Activities
- Student Evaluation
- Student Contact System
- Instructional Delivery System
- Support System
- Qualified, Trained Personnel

Suitable Program Structures

Suitable program structures are directly related to quality instruction and effective support. The connection among instruction, support and structures will be highlighted throughout this section. The literature addresses program structure by saying that programs should:

• Provide appropriate information during recruitment (Lerche, 1985; Noel, et al., 1987)

Information about the program included in the recruitment process aids students in understanding the scope of the program and the program benefits. This enables students to make an informed decision about enrollment. Specifically, students will know prior to registering if the program is the appropriate one for them. Other benefits of informational recruitment are associated with setting realistic expectations about participation in the program (as discussed in Chapter 3).

• Gear intake/orientation processes to completion (Mayer, 1984; Portage Township, 1981; Beal and Noel, 1980)

Programs with effective orientation increase student understanding about the program, help students set realistic expectations and build a working relationship with program personnel. Orientation links the student to the program (Noel, et al., 1987). Mayer (1984) found that this is the step where learners "assess . . . needs and expectations and establish learning goals" (p. 2). Smith-Burke (1987) found that discussions with students regarding attendance expectations help students understand the kind of commitment to the program that is needed.

• Create an assessment system for placement, diagnosing skill needs, monitoring progress, certifying mastery, and identifying affective needs (Lerche, 1985; Balmuth, 1987; Wlodkowski, 1988)

Students expect programs to assess their skills (Smith-Burke, 1987). When done correctly, it will avoid false starts which contribute to student frustration, discouragement, and loss of productive learning time (Balmuth, 1987). Assessment which is integrated with instruction enables instructors to monitor student progress and certify skill gains. Mavis (1987) includes the need for an assessment of problem solving skills during the diagnostic phase as being important with disadvantaged students. (The benefits of effective problem solving skills were discussed in Chapter 3.) Wlodkowski (1988) points out that assessment should address both cognitive and affective needs.

• Recognize student achievement, time invested, and dedication (Balmuth, 1987)

Acknowledging student achievement is usually considered a classroom activity; however, the literature notes that public/tangible recognition of student achievement is a strong motivator and

should be a program-wide activity as well. When student achievement is celebrated, students enjoy the recognition for their hard work and stay in programs longer.

• Institute an early-alert/counseling system to identify problems (Darling, 1983; Champagne and Young, 1980; Beal and Noel, 1980; Mulligan, 1989)

Without an identification system, students drop out thinking they have no other alternative. Limited problem solving skills prevent them from seeing the long-term consequences of their decisions. An early alert system enables the instructor to take swift action at the initial stages of a problem without letting the problem reach a crisis level so that it is too late to keep the student in the program. It is not unusual for students not be able to identify problems early or, if they can, become immobilized when confronted with the problem (Schlossberg, 1984). The counseling support must be backed by a process to detect problems, thus enabling a support system and instructional program to work together to identify and solve student problems.

• Establish processes for student referral and coordinate/collaborate with other agencies for services (Jackson-Mayer, 1987)

The most frequently used referral services include: Department of Social Services (number 1), employment security and other job service agencies (number 2), and community services composed of churches, libraries and community based agencies (number 3). Coordination/collaboration of services expands program capacity to deliver services. The merits of providing supportive services were discussed in Chapter 3. All students, regardless of the time of day/night they attend classes/tutoring sessions, must have access to needed services.

• Create a student contact system including no-show and excessive absentee follow-up (Jackson-Mayer, 1987; Smith-Burke, 1987)

Jackson-Mayer (1987) found that a student contact system was an effective retention strategy employed by North Carolina institutions. Based on the input from programs and students who were in or had left adult high school programs, interviews with no-shows and excessive absentee follow-up were initiated The results included a no-show drop rate from 14 percent to 7 percent and an overall dropout rate decrease by 11 percent. It has also been found that a student contact/follow-up process improves attendance (Smith-Burke, 1987). Follow-up emphasizes the

importance of the individual to the program and provides valuable program information as to why students are leaving/not attending.

• Initiate activities for students (Beal and Noel, 1980)

While most programs are "no-frills" programs, students still need activities to connect them to the program. These activities vary from recognition events to class/support group parties. Whenever families can be involved, it intensifies the bond among programs, students and their families. With that bond comes additional support to the student.

• Evaluate programs using student feedback (Lerche, 1985; Beal and Noel, 1980)

Involving students in the program evaluation process leads to improved programs and services. A systematic approach enables the program to examine each of its components to determine where improvement is needed (Stein, 1993). Customer satisfaction is the driving force in attaining student retention.

• Facilitate car pools and child care (Jackson-Mayer, 1987; Smith-Burke, 1987)

The need for transportation and child care has been known as a structural need almost since the inception of the Adult Education Act itself. Programs that provide child care and transportation increase retention rates. (It also opens the door to greater participation from a population group who would be excluded from participation without child care or transportation services.)

• Ensure a quality instructional program

Satisfaction with the learning activity (Anderson and Darkenwald, 1979) is one of the most powerful elements of continued participation in adult programs. Qualified, trained personnel makes a difference. (The benefits of effective, quality instruction are noted in Chapter 4.)

• Use a student retention team (Engleberg, 1982; Beal and Noel, 1980)

A student retention team becomes the mechanism to coordinate the program's student retention efforts and to monitor progress. Student retention teams are instrumental in coordinating drop-out prevention activities, collecting data and reporting student retention accountability information.

Beal and Noel (1980) found that programs with student retention teams had higher student retention and completion rates. Engleberg (1982) found the use of student retention teams are most successful when they have strong administrative support and commitment, instructor representation, and student centered efforts. A fuller explanation follows in Chapter 6.

Organizing Programs for Student Retention

State policy and guidelines ensure that structures are in place to provide effective support and quality instruction. A systematic approach ensuring equal access to instruction, support and services will increase the number of students remaining in programs until they attain their goals.

CHAPTER 6

EMBARKING UPON A STUDENT RETENTION SYSTEM: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

> *Feedback on results is the number one motivator for people.*
> *Ed Blanchard*

The United States Department of Education (USDOEd) in Model Indicators of Program Quality (1993) calls upon programs to measure retention "in light of student progress toward meeting their educational needs by time in the program." USDOEd measures student retention in the percentage of students who completed an instructional program, met their own personal objectives, or are continuing in an instructional program. (See Appendix A for a listing of state retention rates identified by USDOEd.) States are in the process of formulating how they will examine student retention and may or may not be using the USDOEd definition.

Principles of Student Retention

Regardless of how student retention is measured at the national or state levels, there are seven basic principles in student retention efforts coming from the literature. To recap the principles described throughout this monograph:

- Student retention is a by-product of services and a tool to achieve student success.
- Programs need a vision to guide student retention efforts and measurable goals to reach that vision.
- Programs control the conditions to foster student participation/retention.
- Student attendance is necessary for achievement and student satisfaction with the program is directly linked to attendance.
- Programs must have a student support system, quality instructional program and flexible processes that help students sustain motivation and maintain participation.

- Programs must obtain student commitment to program completion because commitment is synonymous with persistence.
- All program personnel (especially instructors) impact student persistence and that impact goes beyond academic reasons leading to non-participation.

Analyzing Student Retention Information

Program processes pinpoint the areas where programs need to direct their attention. To determine if program efforts are making a difference and meeting student retention goals requires gathering data and analyzing findings. Analysis determines if:

- student goals have been identified
- student goals are being met
- students are making progress toward their goals
- student attendance is maintained
- students are achieving
- the percentage of students who completed an instructional program, met their own personal objectives, or are continuing in an instructional program is at an acceptable level.

Data gathering involves collecting information on the:

- number of students meeting their goals
- number of students showing growth/progress toward their goals
- attendance by student contact hours (by level and type of program)
- movement of students from one instructional level to the next
- number of students continuing in the program from one year to the next

After collecting the data, student contact hours can be analyzed. Total Quality Management recommends analyzing daily records, but that is overkill in the adult education setting. Student contact hour totals aggregated by month, semester and year will yield several analyses. Programs can determine:

- student contact patterns for specific student sub-populations (i.e., 0-4, ESL, incarcerated, etc.)
- where program plateau points are
- if the average of the student contact hours is sufficient to enable students to attain their goals (Less than 50 student contact hours per semester makes achieving a concrete learning goal difficult.)
- if the steps currently being taken are achieving the desired results
- which measures are effective in retaining students
- which strategies of the retention team are the most effective

Student Retention Team

Total commitment of all program staff in time, energy and belief leads to student retention. To get staff involved, create a student retention team (SRT). Beal and Noel noted as early as 1980 that programs with SRTs have the greatest retention rates. SRTs are created with one idea — increasing the program completion rate. Objectives of the SRT may vary from program to program but can be categorized into the areas of:

- coordinating drop-out prevention activities
- solving organizational problems attributing to drop-out rate
- ensuring that processes and support are in place to decrease the dropout rate
- fostering the implementation of instructional strategies that support student retention
- handling intervention
- collecting and reporting student retention accountability information (i.e., establishing criteria, determining measures, analyzing data and reporting regularly)

The SRT is the focal point for planning and implementing the program's student retention vision. It represents the entire staff and keeps programs on target. The result is programs with a greater sense of coherence with integrated instruction, support and structures. The bottom line is greater student success opportunities through improved student retention and increased program completion.

Analysis of data reflects patterns and trends. From this analysis, the program administrator can determine areas where change is needed. Goals, objectives, activities and indicators of success will enable the administrator and staff to know when their efforts are effective.

Policy makers and program providers will obtain desired results through a systematic effort that integrates effective practices, sound research, goal setting, and resources (dollars and time). This can only be accomplished through a unified effort. Effective student retention teams operating within programs can guide programs in planning and implementing effective student retention systems.

Concluding Remarks

Student retention is the imperative of all states and programs. It is one tool to help students achieve success. As states fulfill the mandates of the National Literacy Act of 1991, more student retention strategies will be implemented. Most states have defined student retention using contact hours and achievement of student goals (see Appendix B). Clearly, state and local commitments are necessary to improve student retention and achieve student success. The approaches suggested in this monograph are not difficult to implement. Implementing the strategies will have a powerful effect on program completions. In the final analysis, student success will be achieved for students.

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APPENDIX A

RETENTION RATES BY STATE/TERRITORY FOR PROGRAM YEAR 1991

Alabama	73%	Montana	66%
Alaska	72%	Nebraska	65%
Arkansas	94%	Nevada	90%
Arizona	93%	New Hampshire	81%
California	76%	New Jersey	65%
Colorado	68%	New Mexico	77%
Connecticut	95%	New York	83%
Delaware	79%	North Carolina	79%
District of Columbia	83%	North Dakota	75%
Florida	70%	Northern Mariana Islands	54%
Georgia	N/A	Ohio	76%
Guam	20%	Oklahoma	69%
Hawaii	86%	Oregon	72%
Idaho	76%	Pennsylvania	74%
Illinois	N/A	Puerto Rico	91%
Indiana	72%	Rhode Island	86%
Iowa	87%	South Carolina	90%
Kansas	72%	South Dakota	78%
Kentucky	71%	Tennessee	72%
Louisiana	75%	Texas	73%
Maine	74%	Utah	N/A
Maryland	N/A	Vermont	69%
Massachusetts	72%	Virginia	N/A
Michigan	61%	Washington	72%
Minnesota	79%	West Virginia	74%
Mississippi	72%	Wisconsin	N/A
Missouri	78%	Wyoming	74%

(Source: US Department of Education, State Profiles, September, 1993)

APPENDIX B

HOW STATES ARE VIEWING STUDENT RETENTION

State	Formulas/Measures	Definitions/Descriptions
California	The California State Plan for Adult Education requires local programs to implement a recruitment and retention policy.	ESL Quality indicators speak to retention: Retention measures in light of students' progress toward meeting their educational needs by time in program.
Delaware	Two areas of focus: • The number of student contact hours divided by the number of students enrolled. • The number of students enrolled minus the number of students withdrawn without meeting goals or outcomes/achievements divided by the number of students enrolled.	Retention is students continuing in the program until student goals are met or until the course of study is completed. A withdrawal is determined by a stated exit prior to meeting goals or nonattendence during a period of 30 calendar days without notification to the program (regardless of the number of classes missed).
Florida	Retention is measured in terms of FTEs. A FTE is 900 or more contact hours. A unit of measure is being developed for delivery systems other than LEAs.	Learner remains in the program long enough to meet their immediate educational goals and re-enter and exit as their goals change.
Kansas	Student Retention Goal: 70% of all students complete at least three short term goals before exiting the program. 40% of all students complete their long range goals prior to exiting the program.	

State	Formulas/Measures	Definitions/Descriptions
Maryland	Students carried over from previous year plus those who met outcomes plus exitees who completed. Enrollees are students carried over from the previous fiscal year plus those who met criteria for assessed learner knowledge and exited the program.	The retention rate is determined by adding the number of learners carried over from the previous year to the next year plus the number of learners who demonstrated progress toward attaining basic and life skills (as measured by the domain: Assessed Learner Knowledge) and exited the program during the current fiscal year. This figure is divided by the number of enrollees for the fiscal year to obtain the percent.
Michigan	Number of students enrolled versus the number of students attending at the end of the year.	Number of students that begin a program and complete the year by attending. Reported — the number of students enrolled at the beginning and end of the year along with the total instructional hours attended. The amount of revenue is adjusted based on these figures.
New York	Measures are: • Contact hours • Percent of students post-tested	The program helps the participants stay in the program long enough to benefit from the program and reach their goals.
Virginia	Calculating student retention is done on the classroom and program level.	A learner participating until his or her reason for enrolling is accomplished.
West Virginia	Measures: • Hours in the program by type of program and learning gains achieved. • Number of students meeting educational objectives. • Number of contact hours divided by the number of students served.	Retention is measured by student progress toward meeting their educational needs in light of time spent in the program.

National Adult Education
Professional Development Consortium, Inc.
Suite 422
444 North Capitol Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001
Phone: (202) 624-5250
Fax: (202) 624-8826